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# Towards a Third Level of Analysis in the Work-Life Balance Debate

## Incorporating a 'Society' Perspective

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*Abstract: The concept of 'work-life balance' has been researched from three main but largely separate perspectives: Business, individual and society. Much research has attempted to link 'work-life balance' initiatives to 'bottom line' performance and to make a 'business case' for their introduction. Studies that have focused on employees using 'work-life balance' policies have shown that the issues around a satisfactory combination of work and private life spheres are still mainly perceived as an individual (female) concern. It is only recently that the issues have been regarded as a phenomenon of broader social significance because the negative consequences of the increased inability of finding a 'balance' are becoming more and more obvious in Western societies. In this paper, I argue that the discussion around 'work-life balance' has to be more inclusive and needs to integrate the three perspectives to take the debate to a new level. The underlying theme is that of values, attitudes and beliefs that are held in organisations, individuals and societies and of the ways in which their interplay predicts the ability to achieve a personal 'work-life balance'. It is argued that those values, attitudes and beliefs are innately gendered. By adding a 'society' perspective to the equation, in the form of a critical 'gender lens', it is possible to detect deeply held and widely shared assumptions within national cultures that create gendered social structures which currently hinder the reconciliation of work and private life spheres.*

Keywords: Work-Life Balance, Gender, Organisational Culture

### Introduction

**T**HE QUEST FOR an ideal way of combining the often conflicting spheres of work and private life has occupied academics and practitioners for decades. However, the debate has intensified over the last ten years and has become a "hot topic" (Lewis, Rapoport and Gambles, 2003, p. 824) under the banner of work-life balance. This is because employees with commitments or interests outside of paid employment still face the same hostile conditions in organisations that have been designed for and by people who can, or are prepared to, dedicate their time and energy exclusively to the company (Bailyn, 1997; Lewis, 2001). Despite mounting evidence that the majority of contemporary employees are organised in dual-earner or single-parent relationships (which prevent them from being 'care-free') or desire to reduce their paid working hours for different reasons (e.g. de Vaus, 2004; Pocock, 2003; Roberts, 2004), workplaces and organisations remain stoically resistant to changes that would cater for the needs of the majority of their employees. Thus, the questions Bailyn (1997, p. 209) posed almost ten years ago are still valid: "What is it about organisations that makes life so difficult for committed employees with serious outside involvements? What are the barriers? [...] Why is it so difficult to come to the conclusion that we must rebuild the door [to organisations]?" Bailyn's metaphor of 'rebuilding the door to organisations' expresses the

need to realise that it is the structures that govern organisational life that must be changed if the aim is a more satisfying consolidation of work and private life spheres.

Over the years, researchers have used different perspectives and have come up with different solutions to the problem of combining work and private life whether this is by integration or separation, adapting the private sphere to the workplace or workplaces to private life commitments. None of them have succeeded in fully explaining the multiple facets of the issue. I argue in this paper that the main problem lies in the non-holistic approach to the issues around work-life balance. They have been researched from three distinct and largely separate perspectives. In the following, I will call them the individual, organisation and society perspectives.

The individual perspective approaches work-life balance as an individual, largely female concern. The organisation perspective presents it as an organisational issue and advocates work-life balance policies as the main solution. The society perspective has two components. Firstly, it has been used to explain the behaviours of individuals and organisations drawing on the concepts of norms, values, beliefs and attitudes. Secondly, especially in European research, the society perspective has been used to evaluate government policies that were put forward to support the achievement of greater work-life balance. Thus, the 'society perspective' can be concep-



tualised in two different ways. On the one hand, it offers an analytical tool for investigating work-life balance issues by focussing on the attitudinal backdrop of work-life balance decisions. On the other hand, it conceptualises government activities as a third level of interaction together with the organisational and individual level.

In this paper, there is a focus on the attitudinal component of the society perspective. I propose that one way to advance the debate significantly is to conceptualise work-life balance as a society level issue. It is argued that this can only be achieved if a critical 'gender lens' is systematically included. I am going to demonstrate that only a critical 'gender lens' has the potential to unmask gendered structures which shape workplaces, relationships and work-private life arrangements.

But first, I will illustrate how research in the work-life balance area has been conducted from the three different perspectives, and combinations thereof, since the early 1990s. Then it is demonstrated how the investigation of work-life balance concerns as a predominantly individual issue in a predominantly organisational framework limits the debate in fundamental ways.

### **The Three Perspectives of the Work-Life Balance Debate: Individual, Organisation, Society**

During the 1990s much of the work-life balance debate has focussed on an organisational level of policy making. Researchers have attempted to prove links between individual work-life balance policies, mostly flexible working time and child care provision, and organisational bottom-line benefits in terms of reduced absenteeism, increased morale and higher productivity (Christensen and Stains, 1990; Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Goff and Mount, 1991; Kossek and Nichol, 1992). These studies formed the basis for researchers committed to proving a business case for strategic work-life balance programs, also termed "bundles" (Perry-Smith and Blum, 2000), and to establish those programs as 'best practice' Human Resource Management activities (Abbott, De Cieri and Iverson, 1997; Bardoel, Moss and Tharenou, 1997; Johnson, 1995; Siegarth Meyer, Mukerjee and Sestero, 2001; Zacharias, 2002). Other studies were concerned with the evolution of work-life balance policies in organisations, that is their transformation from isolated policies into comprehensive work-life balance programs with a strategic outlook (e.g. Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kossek, 1997; Galinsky and Stein, 1990; Galinsky, Friedman and Hernandez, 1991; Glass and Estes, 1997; Johnson, 1999). Thus, early research was mainly conducted from an organisational perspective but also started

to incorporate the needs of certain employee groups, mainly women with young children.

In the late 1990s there was a shift of the research focus. Studies were now concerned with the importance of organisational culture as well as social norms, values and beliefs on employees' decisions to take up work-life policies in an attempt to explain the persistently low take-up rates of work-life balance policies (e.g. Bardoel and Moss, 1999; Bittman, Hoffmann and Thompson, 2004; Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002; Cutcher-Gershenfeld and Kossek, 1997; Dulk and Ruijter, 2004; Duxbury, Higgins and Lee, 1994; Galinsky and Stein, 1990; Glass and Estes, 1997; Goff and Mount, 1991; Goodstein, 1994; Kossek, Dass and DeMarr, 1994; Rapoport and Bailyn, 1996; Warren and Johnson, 1995). This approach retained strong links to the organisational perspectives of the debate, in particular 'business case' arguments, but moved the individual employee into the centre of attention.

Somewhat parallel to the shift in the work-life balance debate towards the individual employee, researchers in sociology and public policy have started to link the long established debates in their disciplines around the reconciliation of employment and family commitments with the concept of work-life balance (Bertram, Krueger, Allmendinger, Fthenakis, Meier-Graewe, Spiess and Szydluk, 2005; Charlesworth, 2005; Duncan, 2002; Fagnani and Letablier, 2004; Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Lewis, 1997; Lewis and Haas, 2005; OECD, 2002). However, the three perspectives and the findings and discourses in the various disciplines have rarely been considered together. It is only recently that researchers have started to break away from the analysis of work-life balance as an individual issue in a narrowly defined organisational context but also link the concept to broader social structures, in particular to gender, and present workplace organisations and intimate relationships explicitly as social institutions (e.g. Charlesworth, 2004; Gerson, 2004; Connell, 2005; Lewis, 2001; Lewis *et al.*, 2003; Pocock, 2005). It is necessary to place the work-life balance debate in a social context because, in an individualistic approach, the individual can be held responsible for social phenomena that are beyond their control, for example the crisis of child care (Gerson, 2004). Moreover, as Rapoport and Bailyn (1996) argue in their landmark study, traditional assumptions and beliefs that underpin current work and private life arrangements need to be challenged to enable a better integration of work and private spheres by restructuring workplaces and organisations according to values and beliefs that more closely reflect the changed reality for most workers. In the following, the most recent work by authors that have taken a critical stand to the traditional conceptualisation and research questions in

the field is discussed to outline the major limitations of the current conceptualisation of the work-life balance debate.

### Limitations of the Current Approach

Although the definition of work-private life related issues has moved beyond the focus on women and children and is meant to be gender-neutral, Roberts (2004) argues that the topic is still largely researched from a work-family perspective. She points out that the central theme is one of overcoming barriers to workplace equality for parents and other primary carers which is concentrated on the provision of short-term solutions offered by companies. Researchers acknowledge this focus on females in dual earner, heterosexual relationships (often marriage), in professional/managerial positions, with high household income as limitations of their studies (for example Secret, 2000) but this category of employees remains their main target group all the same. Connell (2005) suggests that in its most common form 'work-life balance' represents a First World, middle-class, female version of balance that might not be important or desirable to everyone. The literature that has looked beyond this main target group suggests indeed that the idea of a 'work-life balance' differs significantly for other groups of employees (for example men or single parents) and that they face different problems in the attempt to achieve a 'work-life balance' (e.g. Bardoel and Moss, 1999; Barham, Gottlieb and Kelloway, 2001; Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002; Duxbury *et al.*, 1994; Haas, Allard and Hwang, 2002; Lee, 2001; Roberts, 2004; Rostgaard, 2002).

The focus on mothers and children in the literature reflects a common perception in the workplace that work-life initiatives are mainly designed for women with care responsibilities, regardless of the terminology. In their study to evaluate variables affecting managers' willingness to grant alternative work arrangements, Barham, Gottlieb and Kelloway (2001) found that their sample of managers was most likely to allow female, non-managerial employees who needed more time to care for their children to reduce their working hours. They were least likely to grant more flexible work arrangements to male employees holding management positions to care for older parents. The authors stated normative role expectations among the major reasons for this behaviour which confirms the argument of Roberts (2004) that work-life policies are embedded and reinforced in an organisation's culture in a way that reflects and re-enforces existing societal norms, e.g. traditional gender roles. Such practice favours individuals conforming to traditional, stereotypical expectations and excludes other groups from being granted temporal flexibility and marginalises rather than normalises alternative work practices.

Connell puts the consequences of this way of institutionalising work-life policies in organisations in more drastic words: "Employment policies become part of the re-inscription of maternity on women's bodies as the defining feature of womanhood" (Connell, 2005, p. 379). This means that, instead of changing attitudes about, and the design of, current work practices that are incompatible with other aspects of life, work-life balance policies in their current form re-enforce traditional role norms and behaviours that ignore the realities of a changing workforce. Kingston (1990) argues, that because of the very definition of the term, work-life balance policies are a modest attempt of addressing only some of the issues relating to work and private life and that they do not intend to substantially alter current practice. Solutions so far have often been superficial, quick fixes and left basic organisational structures, cultures and practices unchallenged (Lewis *et al.*, 2003).

This finding is important. In order to bring about real change towards a more genuine form of work-life balance there is a need to move beyond the conceptualisation of work-life balance policies as adaptations of an individual's working arrangements in an organisational setting. Instead, the issues underlying work-life imbalance need to be investigated more explicitly as being caused by social structures, especially gender roles, that are perpetuated by social institutions, in particular workplace organisations and intimate relationships.

### Advancing the Work-Life Balance Debate: Systematically Incorporating a Critical 'Gender Lens'

Building on the literature presented so far, I argue that the debate has reached its limits in the existing conceptualisation and has to be taken to a new level with more fundamental questions being asked. Connell's (2005, p. 378-9) statement sets the scene:

They [work-life initiatives] translate women's demands for fair treatment into the language of the new managerialism, and so can be accepted by the cadres of the entrepreneurial state as rational strategy for organizations – specifically, best-practice personnel policy. ... The idea of 'work/life balance' is a conservative expression of a radical impulse. The impulse is for justice, specifically gender equality, and for the fuller life made possible for all parties by just human relations. The need to express it as a demand for 'balance' arises because of the impossibility of realizing equality within an institutional system that subordinates home to economy.

In an earlier version of the paper he added: "Thus the demand for balance, while apparently contained

within this institutional system and requesting no more than adjustments to it, in fact points beyond this system" (Connell, 2004, p. 16). I will follow the 'path that points beyond the system' and argue that there is a need to look critically at the system and how it deters people *en masse* from achieving a work-life balance. Lewis et al. (2003, p. 831) state that there is a need to ask some fundamental questions: "Why do societies need to rethink working structures, cultures and practices? Why should societies get beyond the rhetoric of changing men-women relationships? What are the benefits of change to society and how should they change? What are the barriers to their changing?" It is back to Bailyn (1997): Why is it so hard to 'rebuild the door'?

Lewis et al. (2003) suggest four basic principles for change: Tackling deep identity issues, encouraging men and women to address gender issues, recognising multiple agendas and ways of integrating, and making time and space for multiple solutions. The discussion above has produced two fundamental criticisms of the work-life balance literature that are represented in Lewis et al.'s principles: Firstly, work-life balance issues when portrayed as individual concerns of employees who aim to combine paid work and significant outside commitments ignores social structures that provide the context for the employee's decisions. This perspective disregards the multiple agendas of the different institutions which are involved in the decision making process as well as the various ways that may be open to integrate both spheres. As an individual, the potential to initiate workplace reform is limited. It is only when work-private life concerns are presented in a social context and the social structures that cause work-private life conflicts are exposed as phenomena impacting on groups of individuals that there is a potential for change.

Secondly, conceptualising work-life balance as women's or mothers' issues reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes and acts to reinforce the existing gender order. Again, work-life balance policies have to be unmasked as such and a conscious 'gender lens' has to be applied in researching the issue. In Lewis et al.'s (2003) words, there is a need to address gender issues, and inextricably linked with gender are deep identity issues. In ignoring the gendered structures of work and intimate social relationships, Gerson (2004) argues that work-life balance research is built on misleading assumptions (e.g. that only women can be carers) and hidden political agendas (e.g. only women should be carers) that are then reflected in the analytical frameworks and findings.

Researchers in the field have started to include both dimensions in their work (e.g. Charlesworth, 2004; Gerson, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Rapoport and

Bailyn, 1996; Swanberg, 2004). Charlesworth (2004) argues that the conceptualisation of work-life balance is too narrow and does not address the underlying structural issues that impact on the decision to take up work-life balance policies, such as the gender pay gap, the division of labour, job segregation, organisational cultures, structures and practices. She points out that these social structures are products of the gendered nature of workplaces and society in general. Pocock (2005) argues that the socially and historically constructed gender order is embodied in work/care regimes that are time and place specific. Individual action is shaped by the work/care regime and the institutions and cultures that underpin and reproduce it.

Although there are efforts to systematically incorporate a 'gender lens' in the analysis of work-life balance issues, these approaches often fall short of potential. Gerson (2004) who presented a convincing case for gender as a social institution and outlined its power in shaping work-private life outcomes, resorts in her conclusion to solutions that do not differ at all from the ones offered by researchers without a 'gender lens'. "Genuine resolutions to new work-family dilemmas depend on providing equal opportunities to integrate work and family life. Policies that protect the rights of parents, offer more flexible workplaces, and create more child-supportive neighbourhoods and communities will ease work-family conflicts for everyone" (Gerson, 2004, p. 172). With this conclusion, Gerson takes the debate back to where she started, seeing work-life balance issues without a 'gender lens' that accounts for power relations and social structures which rely on gendered value and belief systems.

My understanding of a 'gender lens' is more radical than that of Gerson (2004), requesting more than policies and adaptation. Lewis (2001) offers a more promising approach in her study that sets out to address factors embedded in organisational cultures which undermine work-life balance policies. Lewis argues that work organisations are constructed on the assumption that work and private domains are separate and reflect the traditional division of work which is highly gendered. She maintains that given the increasingly diverse workforce the androcentric model of work is no longer appropriate to match women's or men's experiences in contemporary labour markets. Lewis also points out that work-life balance policies fail to challenge this male model.

I argue that work-life balance policies in their current conceptualisation are ill-equipped to bring about a work-life balance let alone a change in contemporary workplace organisations or social relationships. The focus of the debate needs to be redirected to systematically incorporate a 'gender lens', and a radical one for this purpose. Furthermore, there is a

need to conceptualise work-life balance concerns as society level issues that are caused by social structures, which in turn implies that individual solutions are determined by more than private choice. It is thus necessary to thoroughly incorporate the gender literature into the work-life balance debate and to stress points that have previously been made by work-life researchers as well as add arguments to the debate that have currently been overlooked, taken for granted or ignored. Potentially, this perspective might result in an answer as to why and how we have to 'rebuild the doors' to 21<sup>st</sup> century organisations.

## Conclusion

In this paper it has been demonstrated how the work-life balance debate has used three different perspectives, the organisational, individual and society perspectives, to explain the issues around a combination of work and private life spheres. However, the three

perspectives in themselves cannot fully explain the complex phenomena relating to work-life balance issues. Yet so far there have been hardly efforts to systematically integrate empirical findings and theoretical concepts that have been established within different disciplines to provide a more comprehensive picture of the concept of work-life balance that includes all three perspectives. Building on the work of authors who have presented preliminary integrated approaches, it has been argued that researchers need to systematically incorporate a critical 'gender lens' to be able to conceptualise work-life balance issues as a society level concern. Such an approach can advance the work-life balance debate significantly because it has the potential to unmask the taken-for-granted gendered assumptions that underpin the structures of workplaces, relationships and societies overall and that currently inhibit change towards a more balanced relationship between work and private life spheres.

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